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SUBJECT: PORNOGRAPHY ON ICE: VLADIVOSTOK SENDS MAYOR A MESSAGE

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. "Have you seen the newspaper?" was the question of the day in Vladivostok on December 17. The front page of the Pacific Komsomolets newspaper featured a shocking photo of, what shall we call it, a snow phallus erected by residents outraged with the city's lack of snow and ice removal. Snow and ice have paralyzed the city for almost two weeks after a blizzard hit Vladivostok on December 5. Early on, some residents even had to sleep in their cars and abandon the commute home, due to traffic jams. Rather than just a prank that would be the subject of puns and double entendres, this incident also exposes some serious political issues. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) First, is the legitimacy of Mayor Pushkaryev. The mayor was installed by Moscow, since other contenders to the post were found ineligible for a host of technical reasons. Despite a public relations campaign to improve his image, the mayor's popularity is at an all time low. The mayor has been on television repeatedly in the last few days to attempt to deflect some of the criticism, but so far residents are not satisfied. Icy conditions have caused 590 registered accidents with six deaths. Clinics and hospitals are also trying to cope with scores of ice-related injuries as the sidewalks are even worse than the roads.

¶3. (SBU) Residents have been unable to safely demonstrate their displeasure with the mayor in more traditional ways. Even sanctioned protests have been broken up violently or by citing motorists heading to protests for minor, or imagined infractions as happened last week. The communists, TIGR (Citizens Initiative of Russia) and the Federation of Motorists of Russia attempted to band together to protest a wide range of government actions and inactions, but they never reached the main square, even though they were ostensibly allowed to stage a demonstration, since militia men pulled over all traffic heading in that direction. There was a hint of the unrest as early as November, when communist leaders attempted to present the mayor with a shovel after the first snowfall. The mayor's security guards didn't allow the shovel in the building and the mayor quoted a Russian proverb saying "he who brings a shovel, should use it."

¶4. (SBU) The newspaper that printed the photo is also part of the story, since it was founded by journalists who had been dismissed from a competing paper that the mayor's team bought and then used for their own promotion. Pacific Komsomolets asks on the front page whether the rude sculpture isn't a message from Vladivostok residents to the Mayor. The city, in response, banned the sale of the paper to minors, a possible precursor to pornography charges for the editors. The paper says the "immodest" photo was not preplanned and that the mayor is waging war on Vladivostok citizens through an "ice blockade." The report claims that the sculpture was made by citizens waiting, and waiting, for a city bus to make it through the ice. It will

be interesting to see what the front page, full frontal photo does for the newspaper's circulation and whether it is shut down.

15. (SBU) In the mayor's defense, it is not clear how many snow plows the city has, what federal resources were available, and whether the city has first priority on contract plows. And it was a big storm. However, there are rumors that the plows were enticed to richer neighborhoods at first and by the time they got around to the secondary roads the snow had turned to black ice. Crews are out in force now, chipping away at the ice and treating the roads with sand, but it appears much of the snow and ice will be with us until the spring thaw in April. The mayor does not do himself any credit by blaming "hackers" for calling for his resignation, but it is a variation from the usual suspects -- the Soros Foundation or the Rotary Club.

16. (SBU) Work crews are out in force now, trying to chip the ice off the sidewalks and treat secondary roads with sand and salt, but it appears much of the ice will remain until April's thaw. Ice fishermen are now on the bay, avoiding the traffic jams, and the temperature is hovering around -20C at night. Trucks are also hampered from getting in and out of the port, which is situated in downtown Vladivostok. At least one Consulate car is trapped in the port due to the ice storm and the consulate has closed early on several occasions to prevent four and five hour commutes one way for staff.

17. (SBU) Governor Darkin has remained above the fray, and in fact is up for reappointment as governor. All indications are that he will be reappointed, given a positive meeting with President Medvedev this week in Moscow. For Mayor Pushkaryev the future is not as predictable. Nor is it for the editors of Pacific Komsomolets. As for residents, Vladivostok is a city that on one hand is proud that APEC 2012 will be held here, but on the other hand is wondering if the city has the right man in the job of mayor. They certainly do have some creative snow

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artists and an innovative and provocative way to stage a protest.  
JOHNSON